



Jeremy Stone
presents

A Half Interest
In Hell

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by
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CHAPTER I - BEWARE OF CLEOPATRA

AT MIDNIGHT, when Marty Quade returned to his hotel after a quiet evening, he found two telegrams waiting for him. They were from Connecticut. The first was time-stamped 11 P.M.:

M. QUADE HOTEL BALTIC N Y \$600 WAITING FOR YOU IF YOU WILL BE AT MAX'S BAR OPPOSITE RAILROAD STATION IN BRIDGETOWN AT SEVEN O'CLOCK TOMORROW EVENING ASK FOR SANDRA

There was no signature to that one. The other one was time-stamped 11:20 P.M. and read:

M. QUADE HOTEL BALTIC N Y DON'T COME TO BRIDGETOWN SANDRA MEANS YOU NO GOOD STOP I AM WIRING YOU ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS CARE OF WESTERN UNION AS FEE FOR STAYING AWAY FROM BRIDGETOWN TOMORROW EVENING (SIGNED) MADGE

Marty frowned at the two telegrams, and laid them back on the desk. "I don't think these are for me, Joe," he said to the clerk. "I don't know any Sandra, or any Madge in Bridgetown. In fact, I don't know anybody in Bridgetown. And what's more, I don't want to."

Joe Hazelton grinned. "They must be for you, Mr. Quade. There's no other M. Quade in the hotel." He glanced through the two messages. "They must be nice girls—Sandra and Madge. Looks like they have money to burn. I think I'd prefer Madge, if you ask me—"

"So I won't ask you," Marty growled. He took the telegrams, left the desk, and crossed the lobby to the Western Union counter at the other side.

"Have you got a thousand dollars for me, wired from Bridgetown by a girl named Madge?"

"Madge who?" asked the Western Union girl.

Marty shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Just Madge. Here's the telegram."

"I'll look," she said. "I just came on duty, so I don't know what's in the file."

She went through the remittance drawer, and came up with a paper. "Here it is, all right. One thousand dollars to M. Quade." She gave Marty a sly look. "Gee, Mr. Quade, the girls must certainly go for you in a big way. She sends a thousand dollars, and doesn't even give her last name. How will you have it? I can give you a Western Union check, or I can give you the cash—"

"Hold on to it for a while," Marty said thoughtfully. "I don't know yet if I want it."

"You mean to say you're going to turn down a thousand dollars?"

"Sometimes," Marty told her sourly, "it's cheaper to turn down cash—till you know what you're letting yourself in for."

He started away from the counter, toward the elevators. The telegraph operator at the machine behind the girl called out: "Hey, Mr. Quade. Here's another one for you."

Marty frowned, and took the form which the operator ripped out of the machine and handed him. As he read it, his frown deepened.

M. QUADE BALTIC HOTEL N Y DONT TAKE MADGES MONEY AND DONT BELIEVE A WORD SHE SAYS STOP BE SURE TO COME TO BRIDGETOWN I AM TOPPING HER OFFER WIRING FIFTEEN HUNDRED JUST TO MAKE SURE YOU COME AND LISTEN TO PROPOSITION WILL PAY YOU PLENTY MORE IF YOU ACCEPT (SIGNED) SANDRA

"Geel!" said the Western Union girl, reading the form over his shoulder. "Some people have all the luck!"

The telegraph operator ripped another form out of the machine and gave it to the girl. "There's the authority to pay out fifteen hundred dollars to M. Quade."

Marty scowled. "If I keep on getting telegrams," he said, "I'll be a millionaire before morning." He waved the form at the Western Union girl. "Hold that money, too, till I decide which I'll take—if any." On the way to the elevator he stopped at the desk for his key.

Joe grinned. "The boys are upstairs in your room, Mr. Quade. They said it was all right for me to give them the key, that you wouldn't mind if they used your room for a little poker game."

"Oh, hell!" said Marty. He went up in the elevator and knocked at the door of his own room; and then opened the door.

"May I come in?" he asked sarcastically. "Do you boys mind very much if I disturb you?"

THERE were five of them in there; three plainclothesmen from the local precinct house, a safe-and-loft man from headquarters, and a sergeant from the homicide detail. A couple of times a week they crashed Marty's room for a quiet poker game, without even asking his permission. They had set up two bridge tables in the middle of the floor, and they had stacks of money and highballs around the tables.

"Come on, Marty," said Sergeant Gill of homicide. "We're saving a place for you."

"Thanks," Marty said sourly. "I'd rather sleep."

But he took off his coat, vest and shoulder holster, draped them over the back of a chair—and joined the game.

They played till four o'clock in the morning. The game would have lasted longer, but some of the boys had to report for the four-to-noon shift.

Marty left the stuff littered around the room, and started to undress. He was just getting ready to step under the shower, when a bellboy knocked at the door with another telegram.

Marty swore luridly under his breath. He gave the boy a quarter, and read the message on the way back to the shower:

M. QUADE BALTIC HOTEL N Y HAVE JUST LEARNED THAT SANDRA OUTBID ME STOP CANT RAISE MORE THAN THE THOUSAND I SENT YOU SO I GUESS SANDRA WINS AND YOU'LL COME TO BRIDGETOWN STOP IF YOU COME. BEWARE OF CLEOPATRA (SIGNED) MADGE

Marty swore some more, crumpled the telegram into a ball and threw it on the floor, took his shower and went to bed.

He didn't get much sleep, because at nine o'clock sharp his telephone rang. He pawed around blindly for it, and upset an uncorked bottle of Scotch which some one had left on the night table. It spread beautifully over the rug, and didn't put him in any better humor. He finally found the phone, picked it up and growled: "What the hell do you want?"

"Hello," said a woman's voice. "This is Sandra. I just wanted to make sure you're coming to Bridgetown tonight."

"No," said Marty. "I'm not coming." And he hung up.

He turned around and closed his eyes, and the phone rang again.

"Hello," said another woman's voice. "This is Madge. Can I induce you to stay away from Bridgetown tonight? I think I could raise another thousand dollars in an hour or so, and I'll wire it to you. That'll top Sandra's offer by five hundred."

"Listen," said Marty, "do you think this is an auction?"

"Well, I just thought if I pay you more than Sandra, you'll take my money and send hers back."

"Why don't you want me to go to Bridgetown?"

"For the same reason that she wants you to come here."

"I see," said Marty. "That makes everything perfectly clear. Send me the other thousand, and I'll promise not to come near your damned town for the rest of my life. Goodbye."

ONCE more he hung up and went back to sleep. The next time the phone rang, it was noon. The switchboard operator said: "Two gentlemen are on their way up to see you, Mr. Quade."

"Did you say gentlemen?"

"Well, yes. They're policemen. Sergeant Gill and Inspector Hanson."

Marty gave up in disgust. He got out of bed, went into the bathroom and stuck his head under the shower. He dried quickly, and started to dress. By the time he had his trousers on, his visitors were knocking at the door. He let them in, and waved to the chairs around the littered bridge tables. "Sit down. Have a drink. Make yourselves at home."

"I hope we aren't disturbing you," Inspector Hanson said, not sounding very much as if he meant it. He looked around the room, and grunted. "I see you were having a little poker game. Anybody in it that I know?"

Marty looked at Sergeant Gill, who reddened. Then Marty grinned, as he put on his socks and shoes. "Sure, inspector. They were all boys that you know."

"Well, well. No wonder you have so many inside lines to headquarters, Quade. Might I ask who they were?"

"You might," said Marty. "But I might not tell you."

Sergeant Gill breathed a sigh of relief, and flashed a smile of gratitude to Marty.

Inspector Hanson grumbled. He seated himself in one of the chairs. "All right, Quade, let's skip that. Gill and I are here on other business."

"Fire away," said Marty, sliding into his shirt.

"I want to talk to you about Felix Gildey," Hanson went on slowly, watching Marty carefully.

Marty stood in front of the mirror, knotting his tie. "Gildey? You mean the guy they're after for the Bronx payroll robbery?"

"Come off it," said Hanson. "You know damned well all about Felix Gildey."

"Sure," said Marty. "So does everybody else. It was spread all over the papers. Gildey's mob rubbed out a cashier and two guards, and got away with a quarter of a million bucks in small bills. So far, there's been no trace of him or his mob. So what?"

"So I have information," Hanson said heavily, "that Gildey double-crossed his mob, and lammed with the whole two hundred and fifty grand, leaving the rest of his boys out in the cold."

"I've heard that, too," Marty said. "Gildey's mob are after him, as well as the police. But so far, he's been able to outsmart all of them. Nobody can find hide nor hair of him."

"That," said Inspector Hanson, "is what we've come to see you about!"

"Me?" Marty finished patting his tie into place, turned around to face Hanson. "What have I got to do with it?"

"We got the dope from a stoolie," said Hanson.

"That Gildey is going to try to use you to square things up with his mob. He's going to offer them a settlement through you. He's afraid they're on to where he's hiding out, and he wants to buy them off."

"Well," Marty told him flatly, "your dope is wrong. Gildey hasn't contacted me. What's more, I don't know where he is. And what's more, if I knew where he was, I'd turn him in. There's a fifty-thousand-dollar reward on his head—dead or alive."

Sergeant Gill interrupted hastily: "That's what I told the inspector, Marty. I told him you'd never cover up for a murder rap. I told him he's wasting his time ribbing you on it, because you'd never lend yourself to such a thing."

Hanson smiled sardonically, "You have a lot of faith in Quade, haven't you. Sergeant Gill?"

"Yes, sir, I have!" Gill said hotly. "Marty is a friend of mine."

"All right," Hanson said, getting up. "Since you're such a good friend of his, he won't mind if you tail him. I'm assigning you to shadow him twenty-four hours a day, from this minute on. You're a cop above everything else, Gill. If you see anything auspicious about Quade's actions—anything that leads you to believe he's contacting Gildey—you'll report it. Otherwise, Gill, it would be too bad for both of you."

He went to the door, and put his hat on carefully. "Goodbye, Mr. Quade. I trust you will enjoy Sergeant Gill's company."

"Wait a minute," said Marty. "This stoolie—who is he?"

Hanson wagged a finger at him. "Naughty, naughty. You wouldn't want me to reveal the name of a stoolie, would you? But I'll tell you this—he comes from Bridgetown."

WHEN the door had slammed after Hanson, Marty looked at Gill. "Johnny! Did he say—Bridgetown?"

Sergeant Johnny Gill nodded. "That's what he said, Marty. I don't know who the stoolie is. It's one of Hanson's private connections. But it's Bridgetown, all right. Hanson had a long-distance phone call from there, a half hour ago. That's why he came hotfooting over here."

Thoughtfully, Marty strapped on his shoulder holster, and checked his automatic. The phone rang. He reached for it, saying: "Yes?"

"Hello. This is Sandra. What the hell do you mean by hanging up on me? Give me a chance to talk, will you?"

"Go ahead and talk," said Marty.

"I sent you fifteen hundred dollars. It's waiting for you at Western Union. But I just found out that Madge is ending you another thousand. Well, look. I'll shoot the works. I'll give you five grand to come to Bridgetown tonight. You go to Max's bar and ask for Sandra, and there'll be an envelope waiting for you, with another thirty-five hundred in it."

"What will you want me to do for it?"

"Just listen to my proposition. If you don't like the proposition, you can turn it down and go back to New York and keep the five thousand to cover your time for coming up. If you like the proposition, and agree to do what I want done—I'll pay you more."

"How much more?"

"We can talk about that when you get up here."

"What's your last name?"

"We can talk about that, too—when you get up here."

"Who's Cleopatra?" Marty asked.

The woman laughed harshly. "That must be something Madge told you in her telegram. Pay no attention to it. You have nothing to fear from Cleopatra."

"All right," Marty said. "I'll be there at seven o'clock."

He hung up and looked at Sergeant Gill. He picked up one of the bottles of Scotch, and poured two drinks, and gave him one of them.

"I'm taking a little trip, Johnny," he said.

"A trip? Where to?"

“Bridgetown.”

Sergeant Gill almost choked over the drink. “Say! Then Hanson’s dope was right. You are mixed up with Gildey!”

“Not yet,” Marty told him. “But I may be.”

“I’m going with you, Marty. It’s Hanson’s orders.”

“Not with me, Johnny. I’m going alone. But I can’t stop you from following me. Only don’t get in my way. Give me rope.”

“I’ll give you plenty of rope, Marty,” Sergeant Gill said. “I only hope Hanson doesn’t hang you with it.”

CHAPTER II

MARTY didn’t like the City of Bridgetown from the moment he stepped out of the railroad station. It was one of those newly prosperous boom towns, humming with defense orders. On one side of the railroad tracks there was a vast forest of spuming funnels, sending dense clouds of smelly smoke up to the heavens from half a hundred factories. On the other side of the tracks was the business and residential section, alive with new stores and theatres which were daily cropping up to cater to the swollen pocketbooks of the town.

Even the circus had come to town. A huge billboard on the side of a tall building announced:

Last Two Weeks ESTERHAZY’S MAMMOTH CIRCUS 42 ATTRACTIONS 42 UNDER ONE ROOF 160 TRAINED ANIMALS 36 ACROBATS 24 CLOWNS A FULL EVENING OF FUN 60c—75c—\$1.00 at the COLISEUM!

Down at the next corner from the railroad station, Marty saw a glittering electric sign of the circus.

Marty didn’t like the smell around a circus. He didn’t care for the odor of the animals, or for popcorn or peanuts, either. He scowled and started across the street toward a sign on the opposite side which said:

MAX’S—NUFF SAID!

But some one tapped him on the shoulder and said: “Hi, Pal.”

He turned around and saw a tall fellow with buck teeth and squint eyes, who was grinning insolently. “Hi, Pal,” the fellow said again. “Stranger in town?”

“No,” Marty said sourly. “I’m the mayor.” He started across once more, and the fellow with the buck teeth grabbed hold of his arm.

“Ha, ha, Pal,” he said. “You will tell jokes, won’t you? Here’s a good joke.”

He showed Marty what he was holding in his left hand. It was a small, snub-nosed automatic pistol. “Very dangerous at close range, mister. It makes a nasty hole.”

“You don’t say,” said Marty.

“See that alley across the street, next to Max’s, mister? That’s where we’re going.”

"Glad to oblige," said Marty.

Together they crossed the street and stepped into the alley.

Buck-teeth faced Marty, holding the nasty little gun chest high. He was so tall that he towered far above Marty. "Now we can talk, mister. I will tell you a few jokes."

"Go ahead," said Marty. "I'm always ready for a laugh."

"That's fine. Your name is Quade, and you come from New York, and the dope is that you're gonna contact Felix Gildey."

"Very good," said Marty. "Do you know any more jokes?"

"Sure," said Buck-teeth. "The joke is that you are going to take me and a couple of the boys to this place where you are to meet Gildey, because we are very anxious to tell him a couple of jokes of our own."

"I see," said Marty. "You must be one of the mob that knocked off that payroll in the Bronx, eh?"

"Be that as it may, I am not saying yes and I am not saying no. But I am asking you—are you going to do what I ask, or are you going to give trouble?"

"I think," said Marty, "that I will give trouble."

He kicked Buck-teeth in the right shin, and at the same time he chopped down with the edge of his left palm upon the right wrist of the gunman.

The double result was instantaneous, synchronized, and entirely satisfactory. Buck-teeth jumped, yelled with pain, and dropped the snub-nosed automatic, all at the same time.

MARTY smiled thinly, and drove a hard right up against Buck-teeth's chin, then followed it with a smashing overhand blow square into his face. He drove the gunman's head backward, so that it smacked against the wall of the building. The resulting thwack had a wicked sound, but Buck-teeth did not hear it at all. He was in no condition to hear anything. His eyes just closed, and his lanky body slid down along the wall, like a puppet whose master has let go of the strings.

Marty rubbed his knuckles, and bent down and picked up the automatic. He wrapped it carefully in a handkerchief and started to put it in his pocket. And just at that moment, he felt a cold chill run up his spine.

Something warm and wet and rough was rubbing against the back of his hand.

Marty Quade had lived a pretty hard life, and he had had plenty of strange things happen to him. He had schooled himself to resist any impulses to panicky action. But this time he had the greatest difficulty in keeping himself from jumping away from that spot, fast. He knew that something was licking his hand. But he also knew very well that it was no animal of the domestic variety. He had owned a Great Dane once, and he knew just how it felt to have his hand licked by a Great Dane. He was familiar with the feel of a dog's tongue.

This was no dog's tongue.

He didn't pull his hand away. He kept it there, with the wet, warm tongue licking at it, and forced himself to turn around slowly.

And for the first time in a long and active life, Marty Quade didn't know what to do next.

His hand was being licked by a great, green-eyed, tawny lion.

Marty had read about lions, but he had never seen one outside of a cage. This was no good at all. He had heard that if you showed fear and ran away, a lion would catch you in a single leap and bite a nice morsel out of your jugular vein. On the other hand, if you stayed where you were, the lion might take the same notion.

This particular lion seemed to like the flavor of Marty's hand. And suddenly Marty realized the reason why. It was the hand where he had skinned his knuckles on Buck-teeth's incisors, and there were little flecks of blood there. It was the blood that the lion was enjoying.

MARTY started to withdraw his hand. The lion growled deep in its throat, raised green eyes to him, baring its teeth.

Marty felt cold sweat along the nape of his neck. But he didn't run. Running would be useless, and besides he had always made it a rule never to turn his back on danger. So he balled up his left fist, and smacked the lion square in the nose.

At the same time he said: "Scram!"

The lion's growl died in its throat, then changed to a whine. It backed away from Marty, still whining, and turning its head away so as to keep its nose out of line with Marty's fist.

And suddenly, Marty heard the light tattoo of feet pattering toward him from the rear of the alley. A girl came running into view. Even in the semi-gloom, it was easy to see that she was the most lovely thing to be found in Bridgetown. She was no more than five foot four, and very slim, with gorgeous auburn hair struggling to squeeze out from under a stiff-visored cap. She was wearing a tight-fitting jacket over a red sweater. The jacket had silver buttons which glittered in the darkness.

Her skirt was red, to match the sweater, and barely came down to her knees. A whistle was hanging from her neck by a silver chain, and she carried a whip in her right hand.

She spotted the lion at once, and called out frantically: "Cleo! Down, Cleo!"

The lion was still crouching as far away as possible from Marty, and whining louder than ever.

The girl came up short, abreast of Marty, and said angrily: "You brute! What have you done to Cleo?"

"Nothing," said Marty. "I just socked him in the nose."

"Oh, you—you brute!"

"Now listen, sister," Marty said exasperatedly, "if this is your lion, take him away. What did you want me to do—stand here and let him chew me up?"

"It's a her—not a him," the girl said. "And Cleo is trained. She would never chew anybody."

"You should put a sign on her then. How did I know?"

"I'm sorry," the girl said, suddenly contrite. "Cleo got out of her cage. I chased her all the way from the Coliseum, and I wasn't sure which alley she'd gone into—"

She stopped abruptly, as her eyes lighted on the crumpled figure of Buck-teeth. "Oh! Did—did Cleo kill him?"

Marty chuckled. "I thought you said Cleo was harmless?"

"Well, not exactly. She has teeth—and claws. If she's annoyed—"

The girl knelt beside Buck-teeth, and Marty chuckled again: "Don't worry about him. I'm responsible for him. Cleo hasn't hurt anybody. Who are you—the animal trainer?"

She gave him an angry look. "I'm the lion tamer." She got up from beside Buck-teeth's body, and got a grip on the lion's collar. "Come on, Cleo. We're going home."

She started off at a lope toward the rear of the alley, with the lion running at her side like a mastiff, reaching almost to her shoulders.

"Hey, wait a minute," Marty called. "Is that lion's name Cleopatra?"

"That's right," she called back. "And I'm Madge, Come up and see us some time. The best seats are a dollar ten!" And then she was gone.

Marty stared after her for a moment, and then suddenly began to chuckle. "Madge, eh?" he whispered. "Not bad. I wonder if you're the baby who signed the telegrams—"

He heard some one coming into the alley from the street, and swung around. He recognized the broad-shouldered figure of Sergeant Johnny Gill. "Oh, it's you!" said Marty Quade.

"I followed you off the train," said Johnny, "and saw you talk to that lanky guy, and cross the street with him. I started across after you, but the traffic light changed, and I got stuck."

"That's right," said Marty. "Always obey the law. Never cross against the light."

SERGEANT GILL came further into the alley, his eyes blinking against the comparative darkness of the alley. "What happened to that lanky guy—" He swallowed the rest of the sentence as he stumbled over the dark pile at his feet, which was Buck-teeth. "Hey—what's this?"

"That's what happened to him," said Marty, catching the sergeant's arm and steadying him. "Don't worry. It's not catching."

"Who is he?" Gill asked.

Marty Quade took out the snub-nosed automatic, still wrapped in the handkerchief, and gave it to him. "Here's your chance to earn yourself a promotion, Johnny, and put one over on the Bridgetown police. Take him down to headquarters. Say you made the arrest. Have him fingerprinted. I think you'll find that he's one of the guys that participated in the Bronx holdup."

"You mean—he's one of Felix Gilders gang?"

"Could be."

Sergeant Gill bent forward and brought his face close to Quade's. "Look here, Marty—then it's true, what Hanson said—about you being mixed up with Gildey?"

"Never think it, my friend. Don't you trust me?"

"Yes, I trust you," Gill said doubtfully, "but you pull such awful fast ones."

"Take my word for it, Johnny, that if I run into Felix Gildey, I won't protect him from the law. You ought to know me well enough for that. You even stood up for me to Hanson. Didn't you tell Hanson you didn't believe I'd ever protect a murderer?"

"Yes—"

"Well, then play along with me. I have a hunch you're going to come out of this with a lieutenant's stripes, Johnny."

"And I might get broke, too—put back on a beat. You could have the wrong hunch, you know."

"That's right," said Marty Quade. "It's the chance you have to take, Johnny. Nobody ever got anywhere by playing it close to his vest."

"Okay, Marty!" Sergeant Gill said decisively, "To play ball with you—all the way! What do you want me to do?"

"Take this lug down to the Bridgetown police headquarters, and have him held for the New York police as a fugitive from justice. Wire New York for extradition warrants for Gildey and every one of his mob that's known by name, so if this one turns out to be among them, you can take him back. And tell nobody where I am, or what I'm doing."

"Okay;" said Johnny Gill. "And where can I get in touch with you later?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Stick close to headquarters, and I'll try and give you a call. Now give me two minutes to get out of this alley, then do your stuff."

He pressed Gill's hand, and slipped out of the alley and into the street. He threw a quick glance to the right and left, made sure no one was watching him especially, and stepped into the entrance of Max's—Nuff Said.

It was two minutes of seven on the electric clock above the bar. The place was of medium size, with a bar in the front part, and tables in the rear. It was a long bar, and there were almost a dozen people at it, being served by a single bartender.

Marty stepped up and said: "Scotch—and the envelope."

THE bartender had a bushy head of hair like a Russian violinist, and a scraggly moustache like the Count of Monte Cristo's before he visited the barber. He squinted at Marty from under thick, uncombed eyebrows, and said: "Scotch and—what?"

"The envelope," Marty told him. "The envelope from Sandra."

"O—ho!" said the bartender, in a voice like a foghorn. "So you're the guy Sandra's gonna meet. You're Quade, ain't you? Marty Quade from New York!"

Marty glowered at him. "What's your name?"

"Jones. Sidney Jones. Glad to know you, Mr. Quade."

"You're a nice, discreet guy, aren't you?"

"Sure. I never blab."

"No. You don't blab. You shout."

"What's that? I'm a little hard of hearing. Ever since the cops clouted me around five years ago."

"What did they clout you around for?"

"I used to be a knife thrower in the circus. Esterhazy's Circus—the same one that's in town now. I used to throw twelve knives at a girl. Well, one night I threw eleven of them, and the twelfth one I missed."

"You mean the knife hit the girl?"

"Yeah. It was a tough break. She had just got engaged to be married to one of the aerial trapeze artists. The knife got her right in the heart, and killed her"—he snapped his fingers—"like that!"

"Accident?" Marty asked.

"Sure. Sure it was an accident. But the cops, they had queer ideas. They said I did it a-purpose, because the girl had turned me down for the aerial trapeze artist. They took me downtown and grilled me for ten hours, and boy they smacked me around. Ever since then, I don't hear so good."

"Then they let you go?"

"Well, no. I had to stand trial, and the jury hung up. They couldn't agree. So the D. A. gave up in disgust, and never tried the case again."

"Too bad," said Marty.

"Eh? What's that? I didn't get it."

"Skip it," said Marty. "Where's the scotch? Where's the envelope?"

"Oh, sure. Sure." Sidney Jones produced a bottle and a glass, and while Marty poured himself a drink he dug under his apron and brought out an envelope which he slid across the counter.

Marty took it and put it in his pocket without even opening it, and downed the whiskey.

"Why, hello, Mr. Quade," some one said at his elbow. "Don't you even bother to count your fees?"

Marty turned around and looked at the woman who had come up alongside him. His eyes reflected grudging admiration. She was no whit less beautiful than the girl he had just talked to in the alley. But she was taller, and older. Perhaps five years older. Her hair was not auburn, but glistening platinum. Yet her features were disturbingly similar to Madge's. So much so that Marty was almost certain at first glance that they were sisters.

"So you're Sandra?" he said.

She was studying him, from under half-lowered lashes. She was wearing a light cloth coat around the curving lines of her tall and slender body.

"Yes, I'm Sandra." She shook hands, and her coat fell open. She was wearing skin tights.

She smiled, and picked up the drink which Sidney Jones had placed before her. "Here's luck!" she said.

Marty shrugged, poured himself another tumblerful, and drank with her.

"All right, Sandra," he said. "What's your proposition?"

She studied him for a moment longer, as if trying to decide the best way to appeal to him. Then she picked up her purse from the bar, opened it, and showed him that it was packed full of money.

"I'll pay you ten thousand dollars more," she said deliberately, "to be a clown at tonight's circus performance!"

CHAPTER III - DRESSED TO KILL

MARTY put his glass down on the bar. "It was nice knowing you, Sandra. Look me up sometime, when you get to New York—"

"Wait. Don't go. I'll pay you more—"

"Sorry, Sandra. It so happens that I'm a private detective. I don't take odd jobs of being a circus clown—even at fifteen grand a night."

"You don't understand," she said. "This isn't just an odd job. This is"—she paused, coming closer to him so that he could smell the perfume of her hair—"this is a matter of life and death. I could have got a dozen men to take the job for tonight, for five or ten dollars. But I wanted you."

"Why?"

"Because the clown whose place you will take tonight is in danger of death. Some one will try to kill him tonight. Some one with a gun will take a shot at him from among the audience. I want you to wear that man's clown costume, and I want you to be ready with your gun. I want you to spot the person who will try to shoot—and to kill that person!"

"Ah!" said Marty. "I begin to see. And who is this person whose place I'm to take?"

She dropped her eyes. "My—my—husband." Then she hurried on, as if to avoid his asking further questions. "I told you, I could have hired any number of men to take his place tonight, and whoever took the job, would be murdered, in my—my husband's stead. But—"

"But that wouldn't be enough," Marty said, watching her out of narrowed eyes. "You want the potential killer removed—permanently. So that he'll no longer be a threat, eh?"

She nodded, without speaking.

Marty grinned. "All right, Sandra, suppose you break down. Open up."

She fumbled with the empty glass on the bar, avoiding his gaze. Then she started to talk, in a half monotone. "I'm Sandra Esterhazy. My father died last year, leaving the whole circus to my sister and myself. Madge is my sister. She handles the lion—taming act, and I do the tightrope number. We own the circus now, half and half. I was married two years ago—secretly. I didn't dare tell dad, because he disapproved of—of the man I married."

"What's his name?" Marty asked. "The man you married?"

She laughed, with a forced note. "Does it matter?"

"Yes," he told her. "It matters."

"His name is—Frank—Gray."

"Frank Gray, eh? All right. Go ahead. Who wants to kill this—Frank Gray?"

"We don't know. It's some secret enemy. Some one who must bear a grudge against him out of the past."

"How do you know they're going to try to kill him tonight?"

"I—I was tipped off."

"By whom?"

She hesitated a moment, still not looking directly at him. At last, she said swiftly: "It was an anonymous telephone call."

"Uh huh. And where's this Frank Gray—this husband of yours?"

"He went out of town. I made him promise to lie low till the danger was over."

"And you want me to take his place? You want me to be the target for some rifleman in the audience?"

Now she faced him. "Yes. That's what I want you to do. I read in the papers about you. I've heard you talked about. They say you take the damndest cases and the damndest risks—as long as you're paid well enough. All right, I'm willing to pay you well. Very well. If ten thousand isn't enough, say how much."

Marty smiled thinly. "My life is all I've got. I'll risk it—against all you've got. Nothing less."

"All right," she said. "I own a half interest in the Esterhazy Circus. I'll turn it over to you. But—but suppose you fail—"

"You mean—suppose I don't kill that marksman?"

"Yes."

"If I don't kill him," Marty told her, "he'll kill me. In that case, we'll put a clause in the contract that the half interest in the circus reverts to you."

"It's a bargain!"

"Let's go over to a table, then. You can write out the assignment, and our friend, Sidney Jones, can witness it."

IT TOOK only fifteen minutes for her to write it out, at Marty's dictation, and for Jones to attest their signatures. Marty folded the document, put it in his pocket, and gave her a sour smile. "All right, Sandra. You've hired yourself a clown for the night."

"Come on," she said nervously. "It's a quarter of eight. The performance starts in a half hour."

"What's your circus worth?" he asked.

"A hundred thousand dollars. But there's a mortgage on it for sixty thousand. So Madge and I have an equity of forty thousand. That makes my half worth twenty. That's what I'm paying you for shooting straight tonight."

"It's a high price, Sandra. You must have a tot to gain by keeping your husband alive—and killing his enemy."

"What do you mean?"

"Your husband a rich man?"

"He has—resources," she said evasively.

"What kind of resources? Cash?"

She looked at him queerly. "Just what are you driving at?"

"Sister," said Marty, "you must take me for an awful sap."

"I don't understand."

"Don't you think I'm wondering why you're willing to give up your interest in the circus? Don't you think I'm figuring that you have more to gain this way—far more?"

"Sure you are. But you don't care—as long as you get yours."

"I might care. I might be interested in just how much this husband of yours has in cash. The exact figure might be very interesting. Let's say it's a quarter of a million dollars."

Her face was suddenly white. "What made you mention that sum?"

"And suppose that your husband's name isn't Frank Gray at all—but Felix Gildey."

"What—makes you say that?"

"I'm only saying it," Marty told her imperturbably, "because I want to play fair with you. Fairer than you're playing with me. I want you to know that I'm taking this job, and I'll go through with it. But after it's over—if I'm alive—I'm going after Felix Gildey. I'm going to get him, and turn him in. Is that fair warning?"

Her eyes were veiled, her body tense and strained. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

Marty shrugged. "Have it your way. Let's go."

They got up and went out of Max's. The calculating eyes of the bushy-haired, mustached Sidney Jones followed them all the way out to the street. . . .

CHAPTER IV - BIG-TENT TREACHERY

AT eight-fifteen, Marty Quade stood in front of a mirror and surveyed himself, and said: "Oh, hell. I was a sucker to go into this!"

Sandra Esterhazy finished buttoning his clown's costume up the back for him, then came around in front and put the finishing touches to his makeup, with a brush from the dressing table. The white covered his entire face, and the red dabs which she painted on, across his forehead, under his eyes and down his cheeks made him feel like nothing human.

He said: "I never realized what a circus clown has to go through to make himself up."

Sandra Esterhazy didn't answer. She had discarded her coat while she worked over his face. Finishing with the makeup, she helped him on with his boots.

Marty asked: "What about this marksman—did you find out how he expects to pick your husband out of twenty-four clowns?"

"Yes. You're wearing my husband's costume. It has these red tassels on the shoulders. That's how the killer will know him—I mean, you."

A bugle began to blow out in the arena, and Sandra said hurriedly:

"There's the first signal. The parade of clowns starts in ten minutes. Better hurry!"

Marty nodded, suddenly grim. He picked up his automatic from the dressing table, and palmed it. "Here we go!" he said.

Sandra came up close to him. "I hope you kill him," she said.

Marty grunted. "And you also hope he kills me, don't you?"

She put her arms around his neck, and pressed her lips hard against his. Then she took her lips away, and looked up into his eyes.

"Yes, Marty," she whispered. "I hope he kills you!"

Then she dropped her arms, and stepped back.

Marty said nothing. He turned and walked out of the dressing room.

He made his way through a crowd of acrobats, trapeze performers, aerial bicyclists, Japanese jugglers and Hindu snake-charmers, and then hurried past the cages of the trained seals, the tigers and the lions. He passed the cage of Cleopatra, and she suddenly raised her paws, slapping against the bars, and growled at him. He stopped in front of the cage and looked at her. She kept on growling, and bared her teeth, as if her dearest desire were to rip him to pieces.

Marty scowled under his clown disguise. Madge had said that Cleopatra wouldn't harm anyone. And Cleopatra had certainly knuckled under to him. But now she seemed different. She seemed imbued with a kind of animal hate which he couldn't understand. He stepped a little closer to the bars, and some one called out:

"Get away from that cage, you vicious beast!"

He turned around, and saw Madge Esterhazy, still attired in her neat and natty uniform. Her beautiful, youthful face was flushed with anger as she ran toward him, brandishing her whip.

"Get away from that cage, you beast!" she repeated. "Get away, or I'll whip you!"

Marty looked at her, amazed. She was even more appealing in her anger than she had been in the alley. But he couldn't understand it.

She kept about ten feet away from him, holding the whip up above her head, ready to slash at his face. "I've warned you about tormenting Cleo," she said. "I mean it. You're a vicious beast, worse than any of these animals. Now get away!"

"Take it easy," Marty said. "Where did you get the idea that I was a vicious beast who tormented animals?"

At the sound of his voice, Cleopatra abruptly ceased her growling, and began to whine. The change in the lion was so startling that Marty might have wondered about it, if he didn't suddenly have something even more interesting to wonder about. That was the change in Madge Esterhazy's manner.

Her mouth opened as if she were about to speak, but she said nothing. She let the whip slowly down, and came closer to him.

"I—I thought you were some one else," she said. "You're wearing his costume."

"That's right," said Marty. "I'm not Felix Gildey."

Madge's face was suddenly white and strained. "Who—who are you?"

"I'm the man you met in the alley this evening," he told her. "You invited me to come and see you and Cleo, so here I am."

"Where did you get that costume?"

"From your sister."

"Good heavens! Then you're taking my brother—in-law's place!"

"Yes. I'm Marty Quade. Remember me? You tried to give me a thousand dollars last night."

HER eyes were wide with consternation. "You're Marty Quade! Why didn't you say so when you talked to me in the alley?"

He chuckled. "You didn't give me a chance. Remember, you and Cleopatra walked out on me."

"Oh, if I'd only known who you were!" She put an impulsive hand on his arm. "You mustn't go out there in the arena, Mr. Quade. You'll be killed!"

Cleopatra, in her cage, seconded her mistress's appeal with a gentle little whine.

Marty turned and looked at the animal. "So you like me just a little, don't you, old girl?"

The lioness stuck her muzzle between the bars. Marty stroked her nose. He smiled at Madge, his eyes appreciating the petite slenderness of her figure, which was done ample justice by the cute little costume she wore.

"Why did you want to buy me off from coming here, Madge?"

"Because I didn't want an innocent man killed in my brother-in-law's stead. I knew what Sandra was planning to do. And I didn't want blood on my sister's hands."

"What was she planning to do?"

"She's doing it now, I see," Madge said bitterly. "She's sending you out there to be killed in my brother-in-law's place. She's hoping that you'll kill the assassin. But you haven't got a chance."

"It's Felix Gildey's old mob that's after him, isn't it?"

"I don't know, Marty Quade. I don't know who's after him. I only know you'll be shot to death if you go out there."

He showed her his automatic. "Not if I see the guy first."

He put a hand on her shoulder. "Madge, you knew all along that the man your sister was married to was Felix Gildey. Why didn't you notify the police?"

She shuddered. "I didn't dare. I was afraid of what he'd do to Sandra—"

"Where's Gildey hiding out?"

"I don't know. He was hiding out here in the circus till yesterday, passing himself off as a clown, and sleeping in Sandra's dressing room at night. But when he learned that his old gang had caught up with him, he disappeared. He used to spend his idle time torturing the animals. Cleo was his pet victim. He'd stand outside her cage with a slingshot, and pelt her with pebbles. She hates him. That's why she growled at you just now. She recognized the costume."

"Does she know him when he's not in costume?"

"Yes, of course. I—I had even thought of letting Cleo out of her cage when he was around. It would have been the end of him."

Outside in the arena, the bugle sounded a second time.

Madge's eyes widened. "That's the final signal for the parade of clowns. That's your cue!"

Marty nodded. "Here I go."

"Heaven help you!" she said.

He left her, and reached the runway leading to the arena just as the last of the clowns were passing through. He joined the end of the procession, but kept a respectable distance between himself and the others. He didn't want the hidden marksman up there among the spectators to hit one of the other clowns by mistake. They weren't being paid to be human targets.

THE other clowns fell into their usual routine, pirouetting, doing handstands and somersaults, parading in trick costumes to represent wheelbarrows, elephants, and whatnot. But Marty Quade walked sedately behind them, with the automatic palmed in his right hand, and his eyes surveying the sea of faces above the arena.

Among all those spectators who looked down now upon the antics of the clowns, there was one who had not come for

pleasure, but for the grim business of murder. Where was he? From what side would the single shot come?

Marty felt prickles along his spine as he moved out into the center of the arena.

A small group of clowns got together and did a complicated acrobatic stunt, which ended in all of them tumbling to the sawdust in a tangled, comical heap.

Marty paid no attention to them. He kept moving around along the edge of the arena, watchfully, his eyes fixed on the opposite stands. By keeping close to the edge he obviated to some degree, an attack from the back, for if the marksman were in the seats directly above him, the man would have to stand up and aim downward. He would thus have a difficult shot, and at the same time attract the attention of the other spectators.

The Master of Ceremonies, attired in a gorgeous ruffled uniform, waved his hand in signal, and the trumpeter raised his instrument to his lips. A long, shrill note blasted from it, signaling the clowns to retire so that the first of the circus acts could go on.

Marty Quade knew that this would be the moment. A shot at this particular instant would be partly drowned by the notes of the trumpet. His eyes darted along the stands, seeking for a glint of metal which would betray the position of the marksman.

And just then, a woman's shriek sounded loud and shrill, above the blare of the trumpet.

The shriek came from the stands directly behind Marty, and above him. He acted without a moment's hesitation. Instead of turning to see what had caused the woman to scream, he threw himself headlong to the ground, hugging the framework of the stands.

Something whined past him, and a bullet ploughed into the ground at the very spot where he had been standing. Thanks to that woman's shriek, he had been warned in time. No doubt she had seen the marksman standing up to take aim.

Marty sprang up again, almost before the rolling echo of the high-powered rifle shot had had a chance to gather volume, and raised his automatic, swinging toward the stands. He saw a milling throng of men and women spectators up there in the fifth row, frantically struggling to get away from one man who was standing on his seat, with a smoking rifle in his hand. The audience had cleared a space all around that man. He was a stocky fellow with a bullet head, close-cropped. He was turning now, brandishing his rifle at the crowd, preparatory to making his getaway. But he saw Marty come to his feet, and swiftly raised the rifle for another shot.

Marty's clown face remained impassive, never twitching. He just extended his right arm, with the automatic gripped in his hand, and pointed at the rifleman. Then he pulled the trigger. His automatic blasted once.

The rifleman's arms flew up into the air, the long weapon slid from his grasp, and he went toppling off the bench. His body fell athwart the bench in front, and he lay, lifeless, with his head hanging down.

The echoes of the two shots—the long, whining bark of the high-powered rifle, and the deep—throated blast of Marty's

automatic—mingled and rolled back from the vaulted roof in a thunderous blend of violence, only to be dwarfed by the sudden rising wave of screaming hysteria which swept the huge auditorium. The audience was on its feet as one man, gripped by the excitement of witnessing sudden death in all its bleak finality. They saw, hanging across the seat there, a man who, a moment ago had been living and vibrant and dangerous, and who was now nothing but a bag of bones and blood for the dissecting scalpel of the coroner.

IN the midst of all the hysterical frenzy, one man made his way unobserved out of the arena. That man was Marty Quade.

At that moment, Marty felt no particular sense of elation, of victory, of accomplishment. He had risked his life and fought for a cause for which he had no sympathy. True, that man he had just killed had been a member of a vicious gang, hunted for robbery and cold-blooded murder. The man had deserved to die. But now that he was dead, Marty was no nearer the end of this strange case of obscure motives and hidden hatreds.

CHAPTER IV - THE SLEUTH SHOWMAN

SANDRA ESTERHAZY was waiting for him as he came out of the arena. He had torn the red tassels off the shoulders of his costume, so that now he was indistinguishable from half a dozen of the other clowns. But she guessed his identity, and verified it by the sight of the automatic in his hand.

"You killed him!" she said.

Marty nodded. "Yes, I killed him. Sorry I couldn't see my way to oblige you, and get myself knocked off, too. But I guess you've arranged for that, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"I know the name of your husband. Surely, Felix Gildey can't afford to let me say what I know! Isn't he around somewhere? Isn't he going to make a try for me?"

"No, no. You mustn't believe anything like that. Come. Come in here. I want to talk to you."

She led him toward one of the sideshow tents. It was the knife-thrower's tent, as the sign above the flap proclaimed.

The people from the sideshows had all come out of their tents, and were hurrying toward the runway to get a view of the excitement out in the arena. Somewhere, a policeman's whistle was blowing. At the other end of the quarters, the caged animals, aroused by the shouting of the humans, were baying, growling, whining—raising a cacophony of frightened animal sound which added a weird note to the hysterical din emanating from the arena.

But at the knife-thrower's tent, everything was quiet.

"Where's your sister, Madge?"

Marty asked as he followed her toward the tent.

“With the lion. She loves that damned lion. She’s trying to keep it quiet.”

She had hold of his left hand, and she was pulling him urgently toward the tent. As they approached the entrance, Marty thought he spotted a flitting shadow, just inside. He slowed up, holding her back, and raised his gun.

But just then, Sandra uttered a scream of fright, and threw herself against him, pointing in the opposite direction.

“Look out! The knives—”

Marty thought it was a trick on her part, to divert his attention from that shadowy figure lying in wait within the tent. But he nevertheless threw a quick glance in the direction in which she was pointing, and he cursed under his breath.

Sidney Jones—the bartender and ex-knife—thrower was there, not ten feet away from them. He had a knife in each hand, and two sticking from his belt. His right hand was raised, in the act of throwing one of the blades. His face was cold, expressionless, and entirely businesslike.

Even as Marty looked, that knife went sailing out of Jones’ hand, straight and true for Sandra’s heart.

And while that knife was still in the air, Jones raised the other one and hurled it.

Marty thrust Sandra out of the way of that speeding blade, and fired at the same time.

His bullet caught Sidney Jones high in the chest, and hurled the knife-thrower back in an awkward somersault. Simultaneously, Marty was conscious of the dark form from the tent looming up behind him, with a black jack upraised above his head.

MARTY had no time to turn, no time to ward off that sap. It would come down on his skull with stunning force. His scalp tingled with expectancy of the descending blow.

But somehow, it never landed. There was a gasp from behind him, and the upraised arm sagged, with one of Sidney Jones’s knives sticking in it. Marty had thrust Sandra Esterhazy out of line of that flying knife. It had missed her, but had found a mark in the arm of the mysterious assailant in the tent.

The wounded man ducked back into the tent, and Marty could hear the sounds of ripping canvas as the man cut his way out through the rear. The fellow must have yanked the knife out of his arm to use on the canvas.

Grimly, Marty started into the tent after him. But Sandra Esterhazy threw both arms around him, clung to him tightly, preventing him from moving.

“Let him go!” she gasped. “It’s Felix. He has a quarter of a million cached. I’m going to join him. We’ll give you half—”

“Let go!” Marty barked. He broke her hold, and thrust her away.

There was no use going into the tent now. That delay had given Gildey a chance to get out. Marty sprinted around to the rear, and caught sight of his man, running toward the animal quarters. He started after the man, shouting: “Stop, Gildey! Stop or I’ll shoot!”

Felix Gildey didn't stop. He had his gun in his left hand now. His right arm was bleeding copiously above the elbow, and he was holding it close at his side as he ran, heading for the cages. He thrust his left hand out behind him, and fired twice, at random. The bullets sang harmlessly past Marty, going wide by several feet.

Behind him, Marty could hear the patter of Sandra's footsteps, following him. He slowed up and raised his automatic, aiming for the running man's legs. But just then Gildey snapped another shot behind him, and Marty heard a cry at his side. Sandra Esterhazy had just come abreast of Marty, and Gildey's slug, though it was wide for Marty, had taken her right over the heart.

She stumbled into Marty, spoiling his aim. Blood was spurting from her breast, staining the flesh-colored tights a deep crimson.

Marty's eyes were bleak as he caught her in his arms, and eased her down to the ground. He was oblivious of the crowd of people who were streaming from the arena, oblivious of what Felix Gildey was doing, oblivious of everything but what the dying Sandra was trying to say to him.

"Felix was on the spot tonight. . . . We needed a man like you to hold the mob at bay while we escaped in the excitement." She paused a moment. "Then I hired Jones—to rub you out. But the mob—hired him to"—she gasped as blood welled in her throat, but whispered on—"to kill us both."

"I'm sorry, Sandra," said Marty. "Damned sorry—"

She was gasping in his arms. But she smiled wryly, trying to talk. "You're all right, Marty Quade—good man. Take care of Madge. Bend down closer. I'll tell you—where Felix hid the quarter million. . . . In the floor—of Cleopatra's cage. . . ."

Felix Gildey had taken cover behind the monkey cage, and he was firing at Marty.

Marty felt Sandra stiffen in his arms. She was dead.

Gildey's gun roared again, and another slug whistled past Marty's shoulder.

MARTY gently lowered Sandra's dead body. Then he got to his feet, his mouth tight, his eyes hard and bleak. He raised his automatic and sent two swift shots at the corner of the monkey cage from behind which Gildey was shooting. But Gildey had left that corner, and was backing away. He was bent on escape. He had a clear path behind him, with no one to block it, except for Madge Esterhazy, who had suddenly appeared in front of Cleopatra's cage.

Marty saw Madge standing there, with only her whip to protect her against that madman brother-in-law of hers. He couldn't see Gildey, who was entirely hidden by the high flooring of the monkey cage. But he knew that Gildey was coming toward her, and would surely not leave her alive when he passed. A cold blast of hate for Gildey streaked through Marty's bones. He set out at a dead run to get around the monkey cage for a clear shot at Gildey.

He could see Madge plainly, standing with her back to Cleopatra's cage, her eyes wide upon what must be the approaching figure of Gildey the killer. Marty saw this as he ran, and cursed under his breath. Sandra was dead, yes. But it would be

unbearable to see that slim little Madge, cold in death as well, all the honesty and vitality and love of life gone from her wilted body.

And just then he saw Madge turn to the cage and do something with the catch on the door, then swing it wide open.

Cleopatra, who had been pawing at the bars, uttered a deep-throated roar, and launched herself out of that cage like a comet, sailing through the air with her claws distended and her great teeth showing.

Marty raced around the end of the monkey cage just in time to see Cleopatra strike. Her hurtling feline form hit the running Gildey square on the chest. He had fired at her as he ran. Marty had heard the shot. But Felix had missed. Marty saw Cleopatra's claws rake Gildey's face and chest, then saw her great teeth sink into his jugular as all the pent-up rage and hatred of the beast was unleashed in one deadly, savage fury of attack.

By the time Marty got there, Felix Gildey was past all help.

HE GOT hold of Cleopatra by the collar, and dragged her off the kill. She growled, licking her chops, but she did not resent his handling of her.

Marty led the lioness over to where Madge Esterhazy was standing, white-faced, with a hand pressed tight against her breast.

"Don't cave in, kid," he said. "This is no time to crumble. Put Cleopatra away."

She nodded mutely, and took hold of the lioness' collar.

"Put her in another cage," Marty said. "Not in this one."

"Is—is Sandra—dead?" she asked.

Marty nodded.

With her eyes almost a blank, Madge Esterhazy led Cleopatra away to a vacant cage further down the line.

Marty Quade turned around in time to see a flying wedge of bluecoats and detectives forcing their way through the crowd of frightened spectators, with Sergeant Johnny Gill of the New York Homicide Detail in the lead.

One of the detectives grabbed at Marty, and ordered: "Hand over that gun, you!"

Marty grinned, and rubbed the paint off his face.

Sergeant Gill yelled: "Marty! It's Marty Quade!"

He spoke swiftly to the detective. "He's all right." Then he turned to Marty. "What in hell's been happening here?"

"I think Sergeant Gill has been getting his lieutenant's stripes," Marty said. He led Johnny Gill to one side. "This all goes in your book, Johnny. I want none of the credit. You tell these Bridgetown cops that you planned the whole thing, and that you only got me in to help you, Gildey's dead, and so are at least two of his mob. The stolen payroll is cached in the flooring of the lion's cage over there. You can mastermind it out of there. Tell them you had private information. Or tell them you deduced it

from clues. Anyway, it's all yours."

"There's a reward, Marty—fifty grand—"

Marty waved him aside, for he saw Madge Esterhazy returning, after having locked Cleopatra up again. She came straight to him, and he put an arm around her and led her over to where her sister lay dead.

"She made a mistake," Marty said. "She loved the wrong man. Now she's dead. Now you're the sole owner of the Esterhazy Circus."

"No," said Madge. "I'm not the sole owner."

"What do you mean?"

She looked up at him from the shelter of his arm. "You know what I mean, Marty Quade. You have a paper."

"Paper? What paper?"

Her eyes were misty. "Sandra told me—she gave you an assignment of her interest in the circus. You earned it. You're a half owner."

"Oh, no," said Marty. He took the paper out of his pocket, and started to tear it up.

She swiftly put a hand over his, stopping him. "Please, Marty. Don't tear it up. I want you to keep it. I want you for my partner. I'd never be able to run the circus alone, now, I need the protection of some one like you. I want to be partners with you. You needn't spend any time running the circus. If all the crooks and conmen and highbinders know you are part owner, they'll think twice before trying anything. Please—be my partner."

Marty smiled. His arm tightened around her shoulders.

"All right, Madge. I'm your partner—till you don't need me any more."

Johnny Gill came up to them. "Marty," he said, "that was damned big of you, giving me credit for this catch. I was just on the phone talking to Hanson, He's putting my name before the commissioner for a lieutenantancy."

"Nice going, Johnny."

Gill's face expressed worry. "But the Bridgetown cops insist on sharing the reward. There won't be much left. What'll you get out of it? Not even credit—"

"You take the credit," Marty told him, "and I'll take the circus!"

THE END